MORE COMPLAINTS

WORLD OF CRYPTOZOOLOGY MYSTERY

When the tales of the Ozark Howler began to appear on the Internet early in 1998, they seemed to be born in the long history of folklore from the hills of Arkansas.

As one Website proclaimed, "The Black Howler, or 'Howler' for short, has been sighted a number of times in Arkansas, Missouri, and surrounding states during the last century. These sightings indicate a clear range for the Howler which seems to be based in the Ozark Mountains."

The Ozark Howler looked like a great example of an old cryptozoological mystery that might be shared on the Internet, where some insights into its habits, habitats, sightings, and behavior could be analyzed successfully. As one Webmaster, identified as "David Gauner," put it, "One of the strangest cat-like beasts to be seen in the Americas since the age of the sabre-toothed tiger is the Black Howler. Described as a creature with strong shoulders, shaggy black fur, blazing eyes, and large horns, it has captivated those who have encountered it."

Before any of the regular online cryptozoologists knew it, Ozark Howler Websites began popping up all over. A group calling itself the Ozark Howler Researcher Group materialized. Before long, Bigfoot researchers like Ron Schaffner began receiving Ozark Howler reports.

On April 24, 1998, a person calling himself "Fred Sprout" sent this to Ron: "I was told by some of the folks at the Howler Research Group that you might be a good person to report a sighting of the Ozark Howler to. I am near Branson, Missouri, and think that I saw it last weekend when I was out hunting with my buddy. It was late in the evening but was still light and we were coming down a hill to a stream bed and there it was, a big shaggy thing. I think it was taking a drink, standing in the water. It really smelled, kind of like, I don't know, burnt onions. Me and my buddy just froze, and it went up the other side. I don't think it knew that we were there. Well, I can tell you that we took the long way back to the car."

As anyone who has been in this field for some time knows, this is exactly how good information on these creatures comes to light. A sincere-sounding eyewitness or friend of an informant contacts us, and we start digging.

Looking into some of the Website information on the Howler and this research group revealed some intriguing things. For example, a "George O. Choangle" posted this description of his encounter: "I became interested in what people around here (I live near Hot Springs, Arkansas) call the Howler (Ozark Howler or Black Howler) after I had my own sort of experience with it. Last year, around New Year's, I was driving home after a party, and I was going around this curve which is really tight, especially at night after a party, if you know what I mean, and I saw this big thing run across the road right in front of me, caught in the headlights. I didn't see a whole lot, but the one thing I did notice was that it had a big, long, thick tail. At first I though it was a bear, but then I thought, do bears have big tails? I couldn't remember for a while, but then I remembered that they don't. I was pretty confused, and a little scared, so I just started my car right back up and went home."

Interesting. People are describing two separate kinds of animals. One seems to be Bigfoot-like and the other more related to a giant panther or something cat-like. We need to investigate deeper, I figure. Some regional "monsters" — like the Jersey Devil — tend to obscure the multiple types of unknowns that can occur in one area. Is the Ozark Howler one of these?

And what of the history of this Ozark Howler Research Group? As one Website informed me, "The Ozark Howler Research Council was recently established after several members of the Ozark Howler Research Group found that they had serious disagreements with the core Group organization over the interpretation of Ozark Howler evidence. The Ozark Howler Research Council, OHRC for short, is dedicated to the comprehensive evaluation of existing evidence and exploration for new evidence of the Howler."

But group names aside, who were the people investigating this elusive, new (to me) creature? I decided to track down some information about the alleged original Howler Research Group.

At a Website that calls itself "Researching the Ozark Howler," I came across the remarkable statement that there is a "Cryptozoology WebRing" owned by the Howler Research Group. The information they give is similar to that on the other sites: "The creature that locals call the Ozark Howler is a cat-like beast with black, shaggy fur and a distinctive call that is heard at dusk. The howler has been sighted numerous times over the last eight years in northern Arkansas and southern Missouri. Some reports

One thing is for sure. Unlike other Fortean and UFO mysteries, the Cydonia controversy will be resolved completely in the not too distant future. More and better images will be produced that will clear things up once and for all. Then we'll see who was right.

FOIA Is Alive and Well

Readers of *UFO Chronicle* know that I often discuss official UFO files released by countries such as Spain, Russia, or France. This subject elicits considerable interest at interviews and lectures as to whether the U.S. government will ever be as open minded. Actually, the U.S. government has released many more UFO documents under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) than all other countries combined.

These documents, from various agencies like the USAF, CIA, FBI, and NSA, got a lot of attention in the UFO community in the late 1970s and '80s. Now they tend to be ignored because they don't support the Roswell crash story. Last year, for instance, the USAF declassified over a thousand pages of UFO documents covering their early investigations in the 1947-49 period. Sorry, nothing on Roswell, even though some documents were classified Secret and even Top Secret. The documents show that the military was quite concerned with UFO sightings, but not that a saucer had been recovered. On the contrary, comments are occasionally made that no hard evidence, such as a crashed vehicle, had been obtained.

These documents also disprove another FOIA myth pushed by many ufologists and media presentations — that most documents are heavily censored and the good stuff has been blacked out. The opposite is true. Only a very small percentage of FOIA documents are significantly censored. Yet one of the most enduring images in television UFO shows is that of Roswell researcher Stan Friedman displaying the blacked-out pages of a 1980 National Security Agency affidavit. The NSA was the defendant in a FOIA lawsuit by Citizens Against UFO Secrecy (CAUS) to obtain 156 documents mentioning UFOs. The government won the lawsuit not, it argued, because of the UFO references, but because the documents could compromise NSA methods for gathering data, such as listening posts in foreign countries. This was at the height of the Cold War.

The NSA finally released the documents, thanks to ace debunker and aviation journalist Philip Klass. In the July issue of his *Skeptics UFO Newsletter* (SUN), Klass wrote that the NSA "released 156 partially declassified 'TOP SECRET – UMBRA' communications intercepts from Soviet air defense centers from 1958 to 1979 which referred to 'UFO' and which NSA had refused to release in 1980.... Most of these involved balloon-borne radar targets used to train Soviet radar operators and assess radar surveillance which the NSA translator-analyst referred to as 'UFO's.'" In other words, Cold War IFOs. I've obtained the 156 documents and there is no doubt that Klass is right on this one. The messages repeat over and over phrases like, "one UFO (probably a balloon) moved slowly..." To keep touting the blacked-out NSA affidavit as evidence of a great UFO cover-up is disingenuous. ■

J. Antonio Huneeus *reports on ufology and Fortean subjects for publications and radio and television programs around the world.*

Keep Watching the Screen!

Looking for UFO information on the Internet? There are hundreds of UFO-related Websites, e-mail bulletins, mailing lists, and chat groups.

A good place to start your search is the Microsoft Network's UFO Forum on the World Wide Web (*forums.msn.com/ufo/*). You can review documents, news reports, and interview transcripts, including one in which I discuss UFOs in Chile. You can also post to relevant bulletin boards.

The Mars Global Surveyor Website, which contains links to images of the Cydonia region and a wealth of other information, is at *mars.jpl.nasa.gov/mgs/*.

Jan Aldrich's Project 1947 Website (*www.iufog.org/project1947/*) is one of the best stops for serious researchers. Project 1947 is a "a 2-1/2 year world-wide effort to document the origins of modern UFO phenomenon." The site features links to several UFO databases.

— J. Antonio Huneeus

The CIA's X-Files. In an earlier column I mentioned that the real "X Files" had been posted by the FBI at their FOIA Website. Now there is more information on the CIA UFO documents site, which is found at *www.foia.ucia.gov/scripts/popdoc.asp?docType=ufo*.

The site contains an index of 278 documents, which range from one to six pages in length. Most of the files were released in 1979, but a few are more recent.

Some are quite interesting, such as a sighting by two police officers in Lithuania on June 25, 1996. The officers described the UFO as "a spherical object hanging and 'pulsing' — alternately shrinking and expanding. At the same time they heard what they described as 'a strange sound like an electric or electronic crackle.'"

The document (based on a Moscow Itar-Tass news report) added that other police and civil defense units "carefully studied the area, measured the background radiation and tape-recorded the strange sound, which was still heard in the area after the disappearance of the UFO."

One could imagine ball lightning might have been responsible, but the report says the sighting lasted half an hour, which is much longer than the duration of ball lightning (a minute or so). In other words, the sighting is still unidentified. ■

claim that it also has horns and a thick beard like a goat's."

Claims at this Website were more enlightening about personnel: "The primary researcher of the howler is Itzakh Joach, distinguished professor of biology at Buffalo River University in eastern Oklahoma." The site also has some photographs, supposedly of the Howler, "taken by a Mr. Leigh Hardaman from St. Louis as he was driving home from a weekend in Branson, Missouri."

Okay, it all is becoming clearer by the moment. A creature with red eyes and horns? A professor named "Itzakh Joach" (which sounds a lot like "it's a joke") from a university that does not exist? What's going on here?

The list of fake names is growing. "Dr. Itzakh Joach," "P.T. Fuelle," "D. Gaunner," and "R. Nixon" are all members of the so-called Ozark Howler Research Group. The "Fred Sprout" individual popped forth on the eastern cougar email list in May claiming all kinds of silly things, such as that he was responsible for all eastern black panther reports.

Over on the cryptozoology email list, moderator Chad Arment was one of the first to see through the game. Researchers Mark Chorvinsky, Scott McNabb, Schaffner, and I were being contacted and asked our opinion about the Howler reports and pointing us to the sites. The design of the action seemed obvious, but other researchers were unfortunately taking the Howler seriously, as if it was a real cryptid. It was time to dig deeper and expose the hoax, figure out who might be behind it, and determine why.

Mounting Evidence?

Some people wondered if the Ozark Howler Research Group might have been set up as a repository for non-hoaxed reports. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth.

This seeming army of hoaxers, using various hidden-name email accounts, were filing allegedly real Howler reports with serious cryptozoological sites. The reports, all supposedly issued from the Arkansas-Missouri Ozarks, were placed on cryptozoology Web sites from the Carolinas to California, and even on a site in France. Descriptions of the creature varied between felid (cat-like) and biped (humanoid or Bigfoot-like), depending on the reporter.

It was an amazingly concerted effort to create an online bank of allegedly real reports that other members of the hoaxing group would then refer to as bait for intrigued researchers. It was an elaborate game, which, while seemingly harmless, could have done damage to cryptozoology and mainstream investigations if it had gotten out of hand.

One of the early informative emailers identified himself as "Jonathan C. Cook" and said he was with the University of Memphis (which may or may not be true), writing an article on the Howler for *Strange Magazine*, and gladly giving out all of the site locations that had been set up to perpetuate this hoax.

I discovered from Mark Chorvinsky (who received hundreds of queries from people wishing to write articles) that "Mr. Cook" was not on assignment for him. "Mr. Cook" seemed intent on making certain that I put an entry on the new and interesting Ozark Howler in the cryptozoology book that I am writing with Jerome Clark.

"Mr. Cook" had also made the mistake of using the name of a prominent Memphis doctor as the source of one of the Howler email inquiries. This was unfortunate for him, as I was able to track down the doctor and talk to someone in his office. Confronted, "Mr. Cook" agreed to confess fully to me if I would not use the doctor's name. Scratching backward into the Websites, I soon found lots of aliases. The creation went deep, part of a multiple-month design to undermine file collections and lines of investigation.

Late in May, "Mr. Cook" told me why he did what he did: "Visiting a skeptics' chat room on the Internet one night a few months ago," he said, "I started talking about how ridiculous the whole Chupacabras mythology is." He wondered if he could "create a new cryptid and see how many people would fall for it, kind of to undermine the credibility of monster tales like Bigfoot and the Chupa." "Mr. Cook" used his email account as the basis for a chain of false Web pages and email accounts.

We now know the Ozark Howler sites are definitely hoaxes. They are not folklore or legends. They are based on nothing but someone's active imagination. Some of the reports may sound like mild-mannered echoes of cryptid material you have seen elsewhere, but look a little deeper. There are no horned, red-eyed,

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Real Scary Creatures Do Haunt the Ozarks. No one has to resort to hoaxes to create the weird animals that *are* seen in the Ozarks. In 1851, one of the earliest Bigfoot-like creatures seen in America was reported roaming in Greene, St. Francis, and Poinsett counties, Arkansas. Telling of sightings since at least 1834 of a wild man of "gigantic stature" with a "body covered with hair" the Texas and Tennessee news articles state that the wild man leapt 12 to 14 feet and left 13-inch footprints. Otto Ernest Rayburn, in *Ozark Country*, notes that a wild man seven feel tall was encountered many times in the 1860s in the Ouachita Mountains in Saline County, Arkansas.

Giant panthers have also been seen in that area for years. In Abesville, Missouri, for example, in June 1945, a mother holding her baby was startled by scratching sounds at her cabin door. Opening it, she was shocked to find herself face-to-face with a huge, seemingly upright panther, complete with large teeth and a long tail. She slammed the door and was terrified as it attempted to break in. It left, but returned, and the unfortunate woman had to spend the night listening to it roam outside. The next day she called on her neighbors to search for it in the hollows. Some saw it, and one got a shot off. The catlike monster terrorized the Abesville area for weeks, and even jumped at a truck being driven by a man named Warren before it disappeared. ■

BEYOND THE FRINGE

ALIENS, METEORS, ATOMIC BOMBS, Men In Black, bug-eyed monsters, giant cockroaches, red-nosed bloodsuckers: They're all coming to get you!

Not too long ago, all we had to worry about were the bushy-bearded, atheistic Communist hordes. Now they are all eating American candy bars, smoking American cigarettes, and going to church every Sunday. Militant Commie-haters and conspiracy buffs have been caught with their evil plots and scary scenarios drooping around their knees. So they have turned to a long list of movie-type creatures engaged in evil conspiracies to liquidate us all.

This country no longer needs a good scheme for taking over the world. Hollywood has supplied plenty of those. What we really require is a new set of substantial disasters that can be covered up (the "coverup" is usually the most important part) so we will have something fresh to complain about.

Let's look at some of the frightening things that have kept us preoccupied during the last 50 years or so.

First, there were the overthrowers. They supposedly covered up their insidious plots to overthrow the government. They were everywhere. No one was safe. Bomb-throwing anarchists were sneaking through alleys, accompanied by mean-minded right wingers and self-sacrificing leftists, all of whom presumably wanted to save the world by overthrowing somebody or something that didn't meet their twisted standards. Hollywood screenwriters were accused of making movies filled with working class propaganda such as Roman gladiators revolting against the slave peddlers, and sinister capitalists chasing semi-clothed ladies through gun factories. Comic books were "cleaned up" after a psychiatrist noted that Robin and Batman were obviously having an abnormal association. (However, Archie was allowed to drool over Veronica.) One senator became famous when he claimed the State Department was filled with Communists. All he could come up with, though, was an army dentist who had a suspicious Jewish name. Girl Scouts were ousted for chewing red bubble gum. It was a bad time but the worst was yet to come.

Anti-Communism grew into a major hobby among people who were suspicious of everyone, created blacklists, and went on to develop more elaborate conspiracies that multiplied like wire coat hangers in a closet. Then, to the nation's horror, all of the conspiracy theories seemed to come true in a single decade: the 1960s.

President John F. Kennedy was murdered in Dallas and for four mind-numbing days the entire world sat transfixed in front of their black-and-white television sets as an incredible drama unfolded. We saw it all with our own eyes. Lee Harvey Oswald protesting that he was "a patsy." An auto horn suddenly blaring as Jack Ruby fired a pistol into Oswald's stomach. None of it made sense. The Kennedy assassination did not appear to be the work of a single gunman.

Very quickly, a large group of self-styled Kennedy assassination investigators formed. At first they just seemed to be part of the small lunatic fringe. But this was a major turning point for the whole country. We would never quite recover.

Then the war in Vietnam escalated into a national tragedy. This led to more conspiracies, sucking in an army of conspiracy buffs including learned college professors, lawyers, retired police officers, and uncountable hayseeds looking for something to believe in — or to be against.

A Growth Industry

Conspiracy has become big business. According to the *Wall Street Journal* and various news magazines, the public is now spending more than four billion dollars a year on conspiracy material, including books, movies, television shows, odd little magazines, endless newsletters, and a vast amount of computer Internet static. Most of it is cultural debris. The lunatic fringe seems to be overthrowing sanity.

Who killed Kennedy? After 35 years of private investigations and two very costly government studies, nobody knows. Everybody from Howard Hughes and Fidel Castro to J. Edgar Hoover and Fritz the Cat have been accused by conspiracy hobbyists. People born after the event, who didn't suffer through those four ghastly days, accept that Lee Harvey Oswald did it with a broken mail-order rifle.

Secrets of the Nevada Desert

In the Fall 1948 issue of FATE, Kenneth Arnold published a piece on the phantom lights seen over Nevada. Something was

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cat-like monsters, or bipedal, hairy, howling creatures being investigated by a "research group" or a doctor who has a name that sounds like "it's a joke" from a nonexistent university. The hoax is transparent.

What we are left with is a cautionary tale. Before I blew the whistle on "Mr. Cook" and his Ozark Howler hoax, this material had reached far into certain Websites, reinforced by planted older sightings, related folkloric tales, reader comments, and foggy photographs. It was widespread. A lot of effort went into making something look like it had been around for years. And if this had made it into an encyclopedia on cryptozoology, it would have made fools of the cryptozoological community.

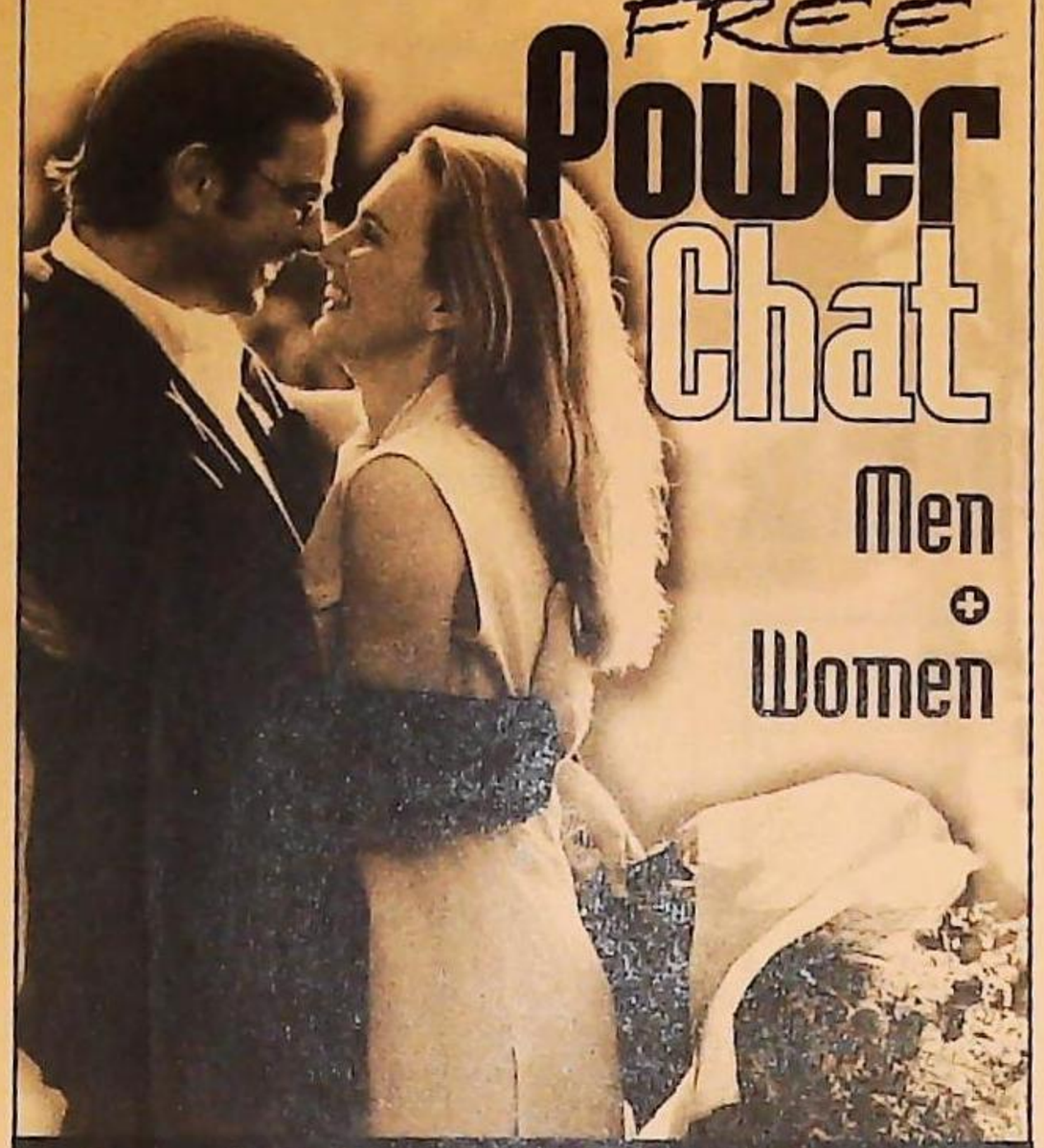
The hoax was created to become a part of established cryptozoology and to discredit some of us when it was revealed from the outside. I am proud that with the cooperation of many people (Chorvinsky, Arment, Schaffner, Todd Lester, McNabb, Bobbie Short, Michel Raynal, Mark A. Hall, Phil Burns, Kyle Mizokami, and others) we have managed to close the book on the Ozark Howler from within. ■

Loren Coleman *is a cryptozoologist and author of* Mysterious America. *His book co-written with Jerome Clark, tentatively titled* The Cryptozoology Encyclopedia, *is Simon and Schuster's lead selection for the summer of 1999. His other forthcoming book,* The Fieldguide to Bigfoot, Yeti, and Other Mystery Primates Worldwide, *is written with Patrick Huyghe and will be published by Avon in April 1999.*

Howling Foul

If you'd like to see the Websites that were part of the Ozark Howler hoax, some of the addresses are listed below.

http://eccentrica.org/gauner/cats.html
http://homepage.usr.com/o/ozark/
http://www.angelfire.com/tn/ozhowler/
http://members.tripod.com/~ozarkhowler/



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